

HYBRIDIZATION OF THE MEDIA SYSTEM IN RUSSIA: TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

ГИБРИДИЗАЦИЯ МЕДИАСИСТЕМЫ В РОССИИ: ТЕХНОЛОГИЧЕСКИЙ И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ АСПЕКТЫ

*Svetlana S. Bodrunova, PhD, Associate Professor,
Head of the Department of Media Design and IT for Media,
School of Journalism and Mass Communications, St-Petersburg State University,
St-Petersburg, Russia
spasibo-tebe@yandex.ru*

*Светлана Сергеевна Бодрунова, кандидат политических наук,
заведующая кафедрой медиадизайна и информационных технологий,
Высшая школа журналистики и массовых коммуникаций,
Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
Санкт-Петербург, Россия
spasibo-tebe@yandex.ru*

*Anna A. Litvinenko, PhD, Associate Professor,
Department of International Journalism,
School of Journalism and Mass Communications, St-Petersburg State University,
St-Petersburg, Russia
litvinanna@mail.ru*

*Анна Александровна Литвиненко, кандидат филологических наук, доцент,
кафедра международной журналистики,
Высшая школа журналистики и массовых коммуникаций,
Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет,
Санкт-Петербург, Россия
litvinanna@mail.ru*

Communication patterns of our society have undergone crucial changes due to the development of the digital public sphere and the emergence of “hybrid media systems” (Chadwick, 2011). The formation of such media systems influences the established media-politics relationship, which is especially relevant to democracies in transition such as Russia. This paper examines the transformation of the mass

media system in Russia with its implications to the online public sphere and the democratic state of the Russian web. Special attention is given to the role of the Russian new media in fostering civic engagement along with the political mobilization after the parliamentary elections of 2011. The authors argue the two-side understanding of hybridization of media systems: the one based on technological media convergence and that of political nature, including the configuration of online vs. offline media parallelism, substantial agenda flows, and the level of solidity of the national public sphere. Concluding from the analysis of the evolution of the Russian media system in 2000s, the authors outline the perspectives of the Russian hybrid media system and its democratic potential.

Key words: *Russian media; hybrid media system; new media; political mobilization; democracy; participation divide; political hybridization.*

Массовая коммуникация в информационном обществе претерпела серьезные изменения в связи с развитием цифровой публичной сферы и появлением «гибридных медиасистем» (Chadwick, 2011). Формирование такой системы средств массовой информации в стране влияет на установленные медиа-политические отношения, что особенно актуально для демократий переходного периода, таких как Россия. В статье анализируются трансформация системы СМИ в России и последствия этой трансформации для публичной сферы и демократического потенциала Рунета. Особое внимание уделяется роли новых медиа в развитии гражданского общества, а также в политической мобилизации после парламентских выборов 2011 г. Авторы предлагают двустороннее понимание гибридации медиасистемы: с одной стороны, гибридация основана на технологической конвергенции средств массовой информации; с другой стороны, она имеет политический характер, который отражается в том числе в структурном параллелизме между онлайн- и оффлайн-СМИ, в переходах повестки дня из Интернета в оффлайн-медиа и в

качественных характеристиках национальной публичной сферы. По итогам анализа траектории развития СМИ России в 2000-х гг. авторы намечают перспективы развития русской гибридной медиасистемы и оценивают ее демократический потенциал.

Ключевые слова: *российские СМИ; гибридная медиасистема; новые медиа; политическая мобилизация; демократия; цифровой разрыв; политическая гибридизация.*

In 1990s and early 2000s, development of the Internet drew in expectations of new milieus of public discussion that would lead to democratization via bigger citizen involvement and horizontalization of communication, especially in transitive democracies (Rohozinski, 1999; Kuchins, 2007). By far, there was limited evidence of the political role of online mediated milieus beyond their purely organizational role (for positive findings of causal relations between communication online and political mobilization, see Shah et al., 2005), and there were even doubts in their organizational potential (Gladwell, 2010; Raupp, 2011). During the Arab spring, as Sarah Oates of the University of Maryland argued on the New Media conference in St-Petersburg in 2011, it wasn't the Internet itself but the shutting down of the Internet access that made young users of social networks come out on the streets to physically reproduce online communication networks. But we argue that, in case of Russia, the new hybrid structure of the media system has produced the impact of a different nature.

Under “hybrid media system” we, following Chadwick (2011), understand the media system, which “is built upon interactions among old and new media and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizations”. In political terms, Chadwick appears to be suggesting a political understanding of hybridization of media systems, which needs to be distinguished from media convergence, or tech-based hybridization, the latter meaning growth of online media segment and

structural transformations of the media sphere in terms of author-audience relations, competition and/or use of user-generated content, or individualization of media consumption. Based on Chadwick's reflection, we argue that, in political terms, a national media system may be called politically hybrid when extensive tech-based hybridization (in the forms of convergent media practices) is supplemented by a nationally- (or supranationally-) bound political hybridization – that is, by a specific configuration of horizontal flows of information and agendas across online and offline media segments, with specific thresholds for agenda spill-overs and uniquely shaped (re)distribution of political influence between the “old” and “new” segments of media market.

In theory, it is the high level of *structural parallelism* in between online and offline media that ensures flows of agenda topics between online and offline audiences; put simply, media outlets available both online and offline ensure similarity of agendas, thus reproducing existing social cleavages and political polarization. But in reality there can be high boundaries for agenda spill-overs both between online (like social networks) and offline (like national TV) media, or even within a media company due to adaptation of content to channel (Bennett, 2003), as well as boundaries that cut across online/offline diversification either reproducing existing polarization or creating new borderlines within audience communities. So the outline of politically hybrid media systems may be more complicated than just the one based upon online/offline opposition bringing in the need for deeper reflection upon democratic quality of a given media system, as its hybridization is shaped by general paths of media system development (Hallin, Mancini, 2004; 2012), socio-political context (Adam, Pfetsch, 2011), media-political interaction (Puyu, Bodrunova, 2013), the level of technologic media convergence, and realities of the renewed media market (Litvinenko, 2011).

By 2010, one could tell that the hybridized media system had fully formed in Russia, the last three to four years being marked by growth of the Internet penetration already producing qualitative shifts in news consumption; but the patterns of hybridization didn't repeat those of

West European countries and provoked somewhat mixed feelings among scholars about the democratic efficacy of online media. As Oates suggests, “the Russian case provides evidence for the notion that national media norms tend to overwhelm international models about the democratizing potential of the Internet” (Oates, 2008).

At the beginning of the 2000s the Internet growth in Russia was rather slow-paced due to the infrastructural and socio-economic factors, but since 2007 the digital communication has been spreading explosively, having an increase of 23,5% from 2007 to 2011: as of September 2011, more than 50,8 million of Russians used the Internet regularly, which is the highest figure in Europe in terms of country population being online (“Russia Internet Usage and Marketing Report” from Internet World Statistics in 2012).

We will start our analysis from the description of the current state of the hybrid media system in Russia and its historical development in correlation with the political context as far as the formation of the hybrid media system is tightly related with the state regulation of the media.

Some political scientists (Bogaards, 2009; Toepfl, 2011) also name the Russian political regime “hybrid” or “semi-democratic”, pointing out that the government in Russia has strong control over politics, the economy and lesser – over the “critical aspects of media and society” (Etling et al., 2010). As the authors of the study of public sphere in the Russian blogosphere mention, different types of control over the media system co-exist in Russia: the main federal TV channels are either state-owned or under state control via affiliated holders or state-controlled enterprises. However there exist independent outlets in the print, radio and online sector. They also describe the current media ownership model as a “hybrid” one, where “the Kremlin actively controls the far reaching national television news, while allowing television entertainment to flourish, and permitting marginalized independent media” (ibid).

The German scholar Florian Toepfl distinguishes four spheres of the modern Russian hybrid media system according to the relationship of the media outlets with the government. It is significant that his division

of the spheres has a strong correlation with technical platforms of media (TV, print, Internet): official mass media (mainly federal TV), mainstream mass media (mainly tabloid press), liberal-oppositional mass media, and social media (Toepfl, 2011). In Toepfl's interpretation, federal TV channels such as *Perviy Kanal*, *Rossiya* and *NTV* belong to the first sphere. They are mainly tuned to provide the point of view of the ruling elites. The second sphere consists of the media owned by individuals or big corporations, "whose profits are heavily dependent on the benevolence of the power center" and who therefore can't afford to be too critical towards the government. The third sphere of liberal-oppositional media includes ardent opponents of the regime who represent liberal-democratic values but have very limited circulation (ibid). Under the "sphere of social media" Toepfl understands widely the Internet-based publications that are built upon user-generated content. This last category is not under strong state control as the Russian government has not yet technically filtered the Web (Etling et al., 2010).

From the beginning the hybrid media system was characterized by low level of structural parallelism between traditional and online media. For instance, the index of quotations of the Russian internet resources ("IAS Medialogia") shows that among the 10 most quoted Internet resources there are only two media outlets that also have an offline version (in May 2011 that were the portal of the TV news program *Vesti* and the site of the business newspaper *Vedomosti*). The others are usually Internet start-ups of the early 2000s, which do not have an offline version, such as *gazeta.ru*, *lenta.ru*, etc. The phenomenon of low parallelism in the hybrid media system makes Russia differ from the hybridization model we can observe in the Western democracies and can be regarded as typical for transitional democracies where traditional media don't enjoy high credibility, or also for democracies where there exist a wide range of actors that don't have access to traditional media (Litvinenko, 2011).

Role and significance of each of the four components of the Russian media system described above have been transforming over time, according to the socio-economic development of the country and with

the growth of Internet penetration. The mayor shift in relations between these components is connected with the decrease of the TV-consumption: Strukov (2012) claims that Russia has already reached the “post-broadcast phase”. Sara Oates’s research shows the decline of interest towards TV as a source of information, especially among the younger audience (Oates, 2012). Some sociologists warn that the fading role of the federal TV, which for many years has been the only medium that connected the whole country together, threatens to destroy the fragile common public sphere that country used to have (Gabowitsch, 2012). On the other hand, the fourth sphere (that of the social media) gains more and more importance: the first two places in the media preferences of the Russians aged from 12 to 34 are taken by the Russian search engine *yandex.ru* and by *Facebook* and *Vkontakte* social networks, followed by the federal TV channel *Perviy Kanal* (Oates, 2008). In 2010, the Internet analytics company ComScore ranked Russia as the country with the ‘most engaged social networking audience worldwide’, according to the time Russians spend in social networking sites (in 2010 it was 9,8 hours per visitor a month) (Russia Has Most Engaged Social Networking Audience Worldwide, 2010).

Social media has shown an extreme growth during the last three years, the leaders being local: *Vkontakte* with over 110 million Russian-language accounts, *Odnoklassniki*, and, recently, *Facebook*, with over 9 million by September 2012 (Socialbakers, 2012b), this “*Facebook* millions” being “generally of the wealthier, travelling, cosmopolitan variety, having foreign friends and tending to live in Moscow and St-Petersburg” (Joffe, 2010). Generally speaking, the Internet in Russia is influenced by the distortions of the offline media system and can be better understood via the notion of national media models rather than via the normative Western ideas of the universal democratic impact of the web (Schmidt, Teubener, 2006; Oates, 2008; Alexanyan, Alto, 2009; Gorny, 2009).

According to the categorization made by G. Bovt by 2002, the Russian new media went through three phases of development (Bovt, 2002): before 1999 when first experiments were initiated by several big players,

to 1999-2000 when most Russian online-only media, existing till today like *gazeta.ru*, *smi.ru*, *utro.ru*, *lenta.ru*, etc., appeared in between State Duma and presidential election campaigns, and to the booming Internet media investment by new players who had no clear political preferences or goals for their Internet projects in the times of Putin's first presidential term, and were business-oriented, trying to deploy strategies of multi-channel delivery and precise targeting, especially on business news market. By 2006, the aggregate revenue, generated by online media segment, reached European levels of circa 2% and was growing rapidly; this fourth period ended with 2008 "heirs' elections", Russian-Georgian armed conflict and the outburst of economic recession. Based on our study conducted in 2012, that consisted of the online-survey on the media use patterns of the participants of the rallies in 2011-2012 (424 full responses) and 11 in-depth interviews, we can point out one more important phase in the Russian new media history, that started with the Medvedev's presidency in 2008 and is distinguished by growing civic activity both online and offline that, after a wave of disappointment triggered by Putin and Medvedev's "castling" in September 2011, culminated in protests after the parliamentary elections in December 2011.

This current phase of new media development, along with the high penetration of the Internet in Russia, is characterized by even tighter state control of TV channels and high polarization of the digital public sphere, with the formation of the new cluster of alternative online media outlets targeting the group of urban liberal intellectuals, such as *slon.ru*, *openspace.ru*, *snob.ru*, etc. In this phase we can also observe rapid evolution of the grassroots activism in Russia, slowly starting since 2008, with its rapid growth in 2010 (for example, car owners lobbied the change of law on VIP cars, people self-organized in fighting forest fires, struggled against the Gazprom tower in St-Petersburg and against of building the highway through the Khimky forest, etc.) and the culmination in winter 2011-2012.

Although it seems almost impossible to prove the causality between the changing patterns of the media use and the civic activism within the

framework of the media effects theory (as far as there exists a complex interdependency between different social, economic and political factors), some scholars show correlations between the use of social networks and political mobilization in Russia. Thus, Panchenko shows that it was mostly the Russian *Facebook* that apparently mobilized the biggest number of rally participants (Panchenko, 2012).

The protest movement in Russian urban areas (predominantly in Moscow and St-Petersburg), on the one hand, proved wrong the arguments that were popular among scholars in 2008-2009 about the lack of democratization potential in the Russian Web (Fossato, Lloyd, Verkhovsky, 2008), but, on the other hand, it also showed the gravity of the digital and participation divide (Marr, Zillien, 2010) in the country. For example, the total amount of Russian *Facebook* users, that played a major role in communication upon the protest issues, is only about 9 million users (liberal journalists from Moscow are used to talking about “the *Facebook* million” while describing their core audience), which is a rather small figure in comparison with the Russian population of 142 million.

The “participation divide” is obviously interdependent with the structure of the hybrid media system we described above. Its components are often isolated from each other, so that, for instance, the liberal public counter-sphere on the Internet is rather “closed up” within its own information world. The spill-overs between the elements of the system are not granted and they become less possible in cases of social crises as it was in December 2011. Thus, Russian federal TV channels, with the exception of *Ren-TV* (which, though, doesn’t have access to all the Russian households), did not cover the protests that started on December 5, until the rally on Bolotnaya Square on December 10, which was then interpreted as a threat of an “Orange revolution” in Russia. As a result, most of the Russian population didn’t really know what was going on in Moscow, St-Petersburg and other big cities (Litvinenko, 2012).

We may conclude that the type of the hybrid media system that has been shaped in Russia in the recent 12 years, which is characterized by a low level of parallelism between online and offline media and the com-

plexity of spill-overs between its components, apparently has the potential of deepening the fragmentation of society and weakening of the ties between different social milieus. More empirical studies therefore are needed to examine the specific features of functioning of such types of media systems in democracies in transition.

We could suggest the indicators that may, given that there's further research on them, predict the "spill-over effect", which may be defined as "online protest communication turning into offline street protest". Beside political and mediocratic trends, one needs to look at:

- the speed of decline in mainstream TV consumption;
- levels of the Internet penetration both on the whole, horizontally (in regional dimensions) and vertically (for the age-conditioned digital divide), well before any other signs of street protest activity;
- reshape of media diets in terms of online/offline consumption, in the aspect of political relevance of news sources and relevance of sources of political information;
- configuration of structural online/offline parallelism in the media system;
- appearance of alternative-agenda media whose agenda reminds of 'alternative' or single-issue parties;
- topical flows and the amount of shared agenda between mainstream and alternative-agenda media.

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